Lovely Strange Dark

ITOMEGURI NO SOBYOU
"A CANVAS OF SPUN YARN"
BY AOI AKI
CHAPTER 7

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lovelystrangedark.wordpress.com

chapter
seven

Behind
your eyelids...

...threads of light pass through.
They form phantoms between each blink of your eye.

What's on the other end...
that reels them back?

Nobody can tell.
WE THOUGHT YOU'D WELCOME A SPARE PAIR FOR PRACTICE
GORGEOUS
WE HOPE THEY COME IN HANDY
TOMOE BOUGHT THESE I DARNED THEM AND ADDED A BIT OF EMBROIDERY

THAT'S THE IDEA!
BETTER WORN THAN STASHED AWAY.
TRAIN AP-PROACH-ING. PLEASE STAND BEHIND THE WHITE LINE.
THEY'RE TOO GOOD FOR PRACTICE.
I'D WEAR THEM OUT.
AKARI, IT'S TIME.
COMING!
TOMOE, NUIKO,
FOR EVERYTHING.
THANK YOU...

AKARI,
THIS IS IT
I'M GOING
TAKE CARE!

BYE, GUYS.
YEAH.
After many auditions,
Akari was finally accepted at a ballet school in Hungary
She left Japan before the end of summer.

Days and months roll by in a flash.
Connected.
Discon-nected
GYNECOLOGY
Reconnected.

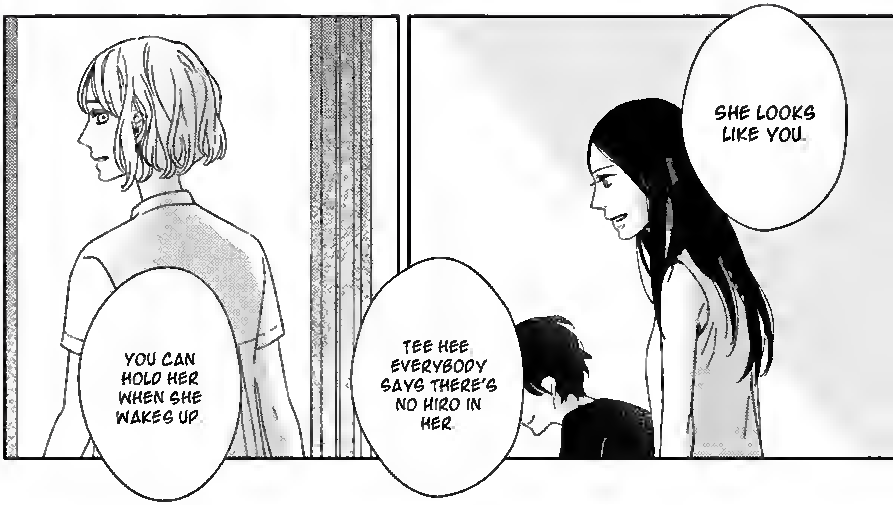
Like colorful stitches...
along the fabric.

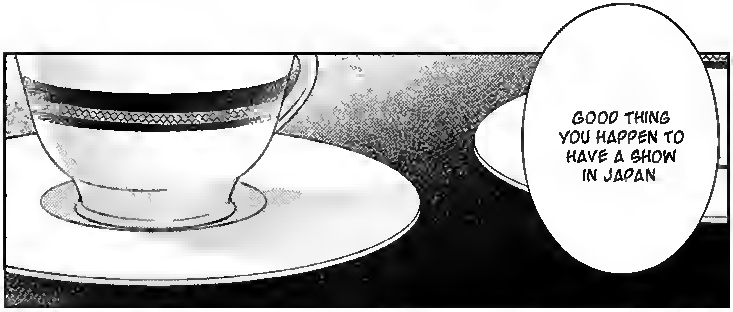
RING RING
HELLO, AKARI?
ARE YOU HERE ALREADY?
GOTCHA I'LL COME AND GET YOU AT THE TRAIN STATION
LATER

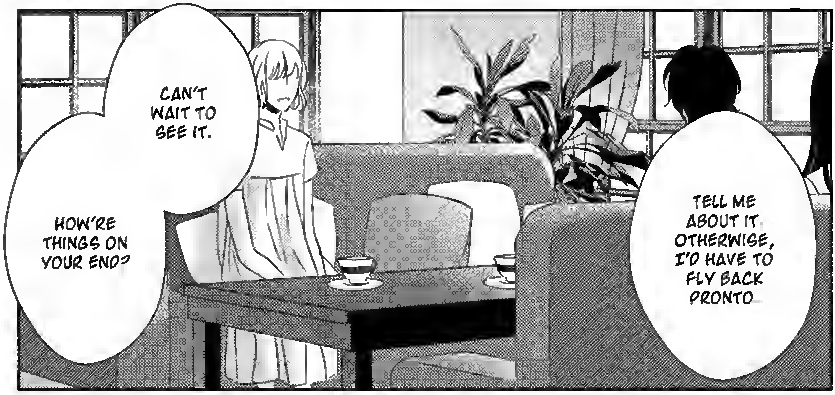
AKARI!
HERE I AM.
WELCOME BACK!
SORRY FOR ALL THE TROUBLE.
NAH, IT'S NO PROBLEM.
IT'S BEEN, WHAT, THREE YEARS?
LAST TIME WE SAW EACH OTHER WAS AT A FRIEND'S WEDDING. YUP, THREE YEARS, ALL RIGHT.

HOW'S TOMOE?
SHE'S GOOD. HAPPY
LIKE SHE DESERVES TO BE.
SHE ALMOST GAVE UP, YOU KNOW, AFTER YEARS OF TRYING
I'M SO GLAD THOSE DARK DAYS ARE BEHIND HER NOW
YEAH
YOU'RE RIGHT

AKARI! SO GOOD TO SEE YOU!
LONG TIME NO SEE, TOMOE
THANKS FOR HAVING US
THANKS FOR DRIVING HER HERE, NUIKO COME ON IN
SHE'S AS ADORABLE AS EVER
OOH, SHE'S SO TINY.
THEN WE'LL JUST HAVE TO BE QUIET ABOUT IT
I'M SORRY I JUST GOT HER TO SLEEP


SHE LOOKS LIKE YOU.
TEE HEE EVERYBODY SAYS THERE'S NO HIRO IN HER.
YOU CAN HOLD HER WHEN SHE WAKES UP.


GOOD THING YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE A SHOW IN JAPAN


CAN'T WAIT TO SEE IT.
HOW'RE THINGS ON YOUR END?
TELL ME ABOUT IT. OTHERWISE, I'D HAVE TO FLY BACK PRONTO.

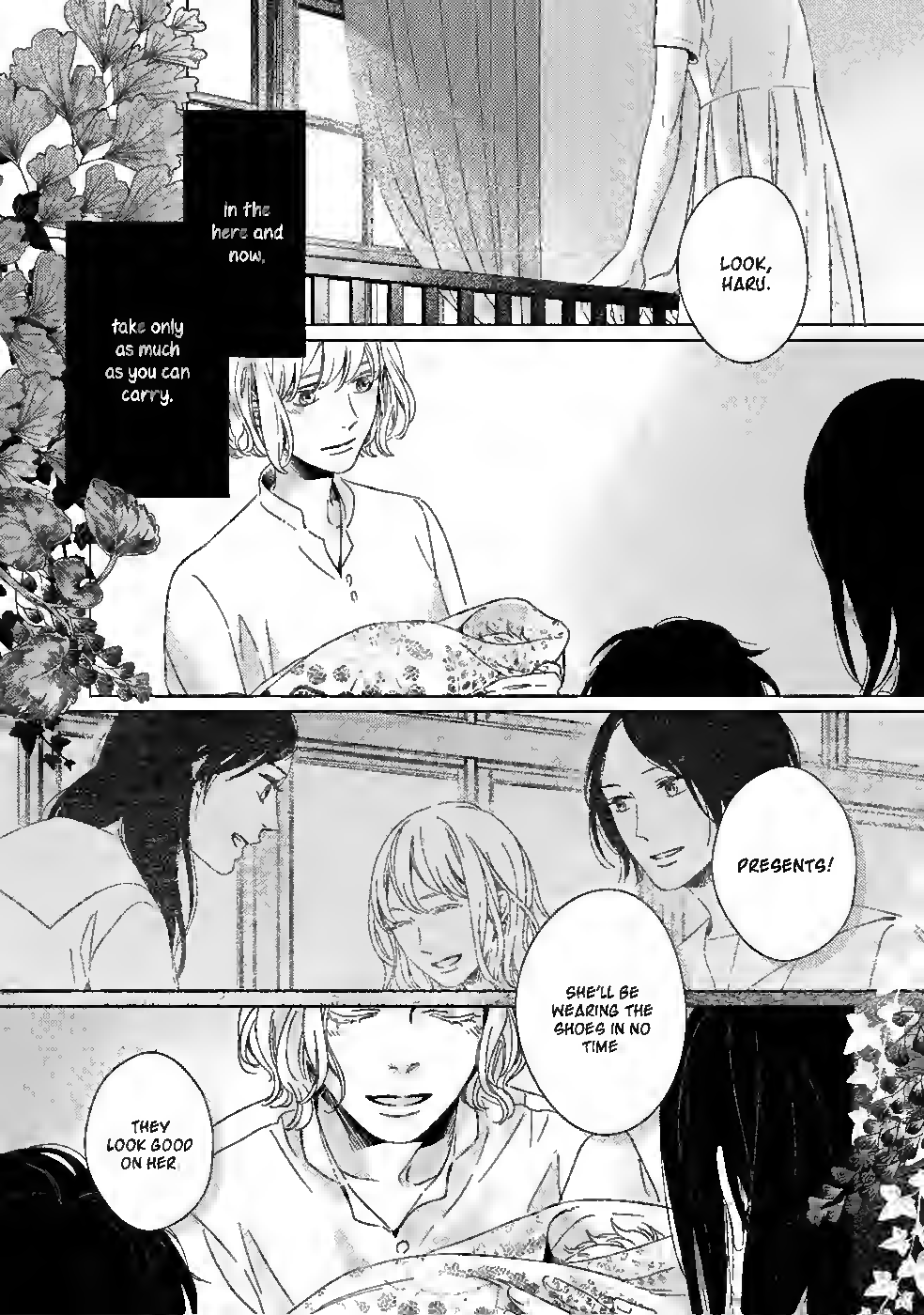
UMMM.
TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, I'M BARELY KEEPING UP
CRAZY ROUTINES?
THERE'S THAT. AND I'M ALL TOO AWARE I'M NOWHERE NEAR AS GOOD AS I WANT TO BE. I'M STILL STUCK IN THE CORPS DE BALLET.
I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF THEY GAVE ME THE BOOT.
IT CAN'T BE
IT IS WHAT IT IS
BUT I GET TO DANCE EVERY DAY.
THAT'S GOOD ENOUGH FOR NOW

THE FUTURE WILL ALWAYS BE A MYSTERY, NO MATTER HOW OLD YOU GET.
THERE'S THE FAMILY BUSINESS, TOO.
I FEEL LIKE I'M FINALLY MAKING SOME PROGRESS.
I'M NOWHERE NEAR THERE YET.
WHAT ABOUT YOU, NUIKO? YOU'RE STARTING A NEW LINE, RIGHT?
YEAH. I'M PREPARED.
TOMOE, LOOKS LIKE THINGS WILL GET BUSIER FOR YOU.
THE MORE I LEARN, THE FUSSIER GRANDPA GETS.
SAME OL' GRANDPA.

THAT REMINDS ME
BABY SHOWER GIFTS
OH, THANK YOU!
HERE'S MINE.
I GOT IT BACK IN HUNGARY
YEAH. SHE'S NOT OLD ENOUGH TO WEAR THEM, BUT I MADE THEM HOPING FOR THE BEST.
NUIKO..
THESE ARE BABY SHOES?

AKARI, YOU GOT HER A BABY BUNTING? IT'S LIKE IT CAME IN A SET WITH NUIKO'S SHOES.
SHE'S LUCKY TO HAVE YOU MAKE HER FIRST PAIR OF SHOES.
I APPRECI-ATE IT.
I DIDN'T EXACTLY GO TRADITIONAL JAPANESE WITH THE SHOES.
TRUE, THEY'RE WELL-MATCHED. THOUGH THAT'S HUNGARIAN EMBROIDERY ON MINE
GLAD YOU LIKE IT.
THIS ONE'S FOR YOU, NUIKO.
THANK YOU SO MUCH, YOU TWO! I'LL TREASURE THEM.

A SAMPLER!
WHOA! WHAT IS IT? IS IT OK IF I OPEN IT HERE?
SURE.
THAT'S THE EMBROIDERY MANIAC WE KNOW AND LOVE.
PRETTY STITCHES, AND IN GOOD CONDITION, TOO.
OH, YEAH I REMEMBER HOW, BACK IN HIGH SCHOOL, I'D GO TO THE FLEA MARKET EVERY DAY AND STARE AT THE SAMPLERS BEING SOLD
NO. SHE'S PROBABLY JUST HUNGRY
ACK.
WAS THAT TOO LOUD? SORRY.
goo—
waaah...
JUST LOOK AT THE COLORS—


in the here and now,
take only as much as you can carry.
LOOK, HARU.
PRESENTS!
SHE'LL BE WEARING THE SHOES IN NO TIME
THEY LOOK GOOD ON HER

Pick your colors and stitch...
as you envision
your pattern.
GOOD MORNING, HARU!
HELLO
NICE TO MEET YOU

End

After Episode

Nuiko

At the thumbnailing stage, my plot or character back-story tends to change Nuiko, however, is a character that strayed from my initial plans as I wrote the story. She was supposed to have a more complex background, but since I wanted her and Akari to be like yin and yang, that had to go. In the end, she turned out to be the simplest and easiest to write out of the three characters.

From here on out, she divides her time between designing clothing with artisans she's long known and friends from her university days, putting her personal projects on exhibitions, and helping out with the family business.

Akari

Although Nuiko is the main character, Akari's viewpoint is the focus of the story. I already had her down as an aspiring ballerina, but after starting the story, I came across an interview with a professional ballet dancer. It mentioned facing complexes and challenging destiny, which was a revelation. I decided to work it into the character.

While this story was running in the magazine, I went to see the *Ballets Russes: the art of costume* exhibition at the National Art Center, Tokyo. Seeing the costumes up close, I got a sense of the passion and drama behind the stage. I think it had some influence on the chapter that revolved around her at the time.

Her days are occupied with rehearsals and performances, though she does come back to Japan from time to time. While perpetually single, she likes children. So when she comes to Japan, she brings plenty of gifts for Tomoe's and Nuiko's children, her source of happiness.

Tomoe

Being an introvert, Tomoe knows herself inside out. She has her fears, but at the end of the day, she's unswayed. Here is a character born from stories told by several of my friends during our school days. She's not particularly beautiful, but she has this calm aura that guys find attractive. Which made her face the hardest, but the most fun to draw.

As a mother, she grapples with the challenges of parenting and housework, falling and bouncing back. Once she has it under control, she starts helping out at Nuiko's embroidery workshop, geared toward parents and children, in between household chores.

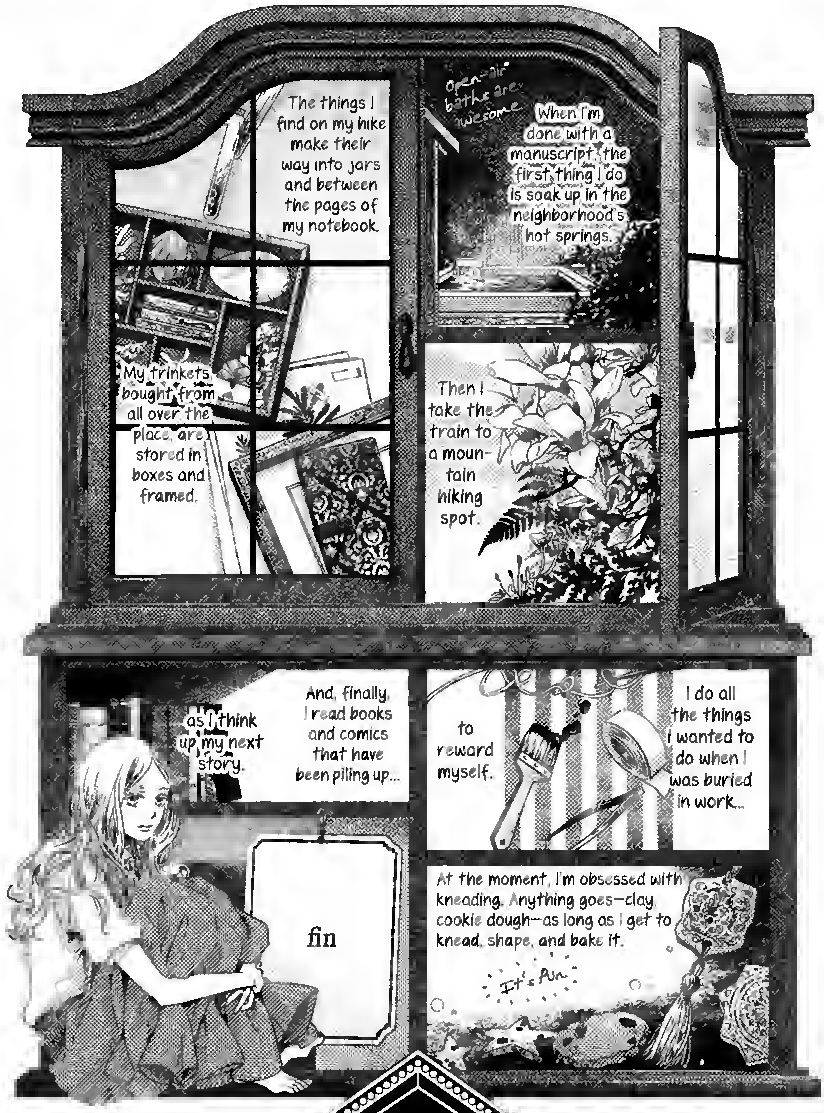
stroke
stroke
stroke
Silk caressing your palms,
plied over the bobbin
stroke
Katsura-yori.
How you twist the strands,,
influences the threads texture and sheen,
giving it a unique color and character.

A WORTHY FIRST EFFORT.
GOOD JOB, NUIKO.
Broken threads will be fixed as many times as need be,
as long as these fingers are in motion.
ALL RIGHT.
LET'S GET ON WITH IT.

End

living with
dogs
Back when I was still living with my family, we had two dogs
and a bunch of other animals
But they were precious, and I loved them
When I tried to take them on a walk, they sulked
When I tried to hug them they ran away
As social animals, dogs have a hierarchy. The youngest of the pack is at the very bottom.
In our home, that was me
They have their own personalities
Enjoying the car ride when going out
Sitting by the window all day long like a cat
Even though dogs come in all shapes and sizes, they are—believe it or not—a single species.

And I'll never forget where I was when I got the news on a subway platform in a faraway city
Fortunately, I'd gone back for a visit not long before that, so I got to see them
I'll never forget holding their heads as they breathed their last.
If having pets has taught me anything, it's that it boils down to outliving them.
Some day, when I can afford it, I'd like to keep dogs again.
In my dreams
I'm grateful to have known them in the time they graced our home, our best friends.
But more than that, I have fond memories of them, of their warmth and their shaggy fur.
That's a good enough reason to have dogs for your roommates
I would love to ruffle their soft, soft fur and play harmonica as they sing along.
a cold-loving, hyper Bernese mountain dog
and
A shih tzu huddling in the snow
They're fun and adorable— I just love them!


The things I find on my hike make their way into jars and between the pages of my notebook.
My trinkets bought from all over the place, are stored in boxes and framed.
open-air baths are awesome
When I'm done with a manuscript, the first thing I do is soak up in the neighborhood's hot springs.
Then I take the train to a mountain hiking spot.
I do all the things I wanted to do when I was buried in work...
to reward myself.
And, finally, I read books and comics that have been piling up...
as I think up my next story.
fin
At the moment, I'm obsessed with kneading. Anything goes—clay cookie dough—as long as I get to knead, shape, and bake it.
It's Fun
essay

Postscript

Thank you for reading this book

The story is a culmination of ideas inspired by many things in my life. The dreams my friends and I had when we were younger. The problems shared with me by people I hadn't met in a while. The things I can do. The things I can't do.

The main character, Nuiko, is named after a very dear friend of mine, though I changed the spelling. As my story ideas snowballed, it was the only name I could think of that would fit a character with a passion for needle and thread*. Nui, thank you so much for being understanding and for allowing me to use your name.

I would also like to thank Ms. Naoko Shimoda, artiste extraordinaire, who showed me around her atelier and helped me with written resources. Ms. Shimoda has written a number of books on needlework, such as *Naoko Shimoda's Needlework Techniques* and *Artfully Embroidered Motifs and Patterns for Bags and More***. They're wonderful, and everybody should buy them.

Here's hoping this won't be the last time we see each other.
Once again, thank you.

Special Thanks

mom
Yogenme
Hachiko
My editor, Mr. K.
(in no particular order)

*The *nui* in Nuiko means "sewing."
**Available in English from Interweave Press.